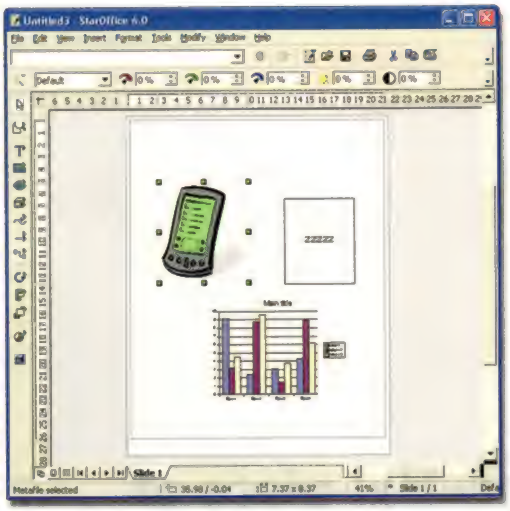
StarOffice 6.0

Sun giveth. Sun taketh away. Then Sun giveth some more.

First Sun Microsystems created StarOffice, a free office suite for Windows, Linux, and Solaris. And it was good. When Sun released StarOffice 6.0, devoted users were chagrined to discover it carried a $75.95 price tag. But Sun also released much of the code as open source, leading to OpenOffice .org 1.0, a free version.



Both are powerful suites that rival Microsoft Office (which costs about seven times more than StarOffice), and each includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation software, and graphics program.

StarOffice 6.0
$79.95
Sun Microsystems
www.sun.com/staroffice

Similarities & Differences

Both suites share much of the same code, but StarOffice includes several features licensed from other companies, such as a database app, fonts, file format filters, templates, and a hefty clip-art library. StarOffice also includes two manuals and technical support that OpenOffice lacks.

New to StarOffice 6.0 are XML-based file formats that keep file sizes small and make data easily interoperable with Web services and multiple OSes. You can password-protect documents, and 6.0 adds support for Unicode, which lets the suite handle 10 languages.

6.0 omits several of 5.2's less-loved features, including the integrated desktop, Web browser, email, newsreader client, and the Scheduler, a tool for managing tasks and schedules. StarOffice does include an address book but lacks a PIM. Despite omitting some features, StarOffice 6.0 isn't exactly svelte. The standard installation takes up 250MB of drive space; the minimum installation uses 130MB.

The suite works with Microsoft Office's file formats, so you can share DOC, PPT, and XLS files with your Microsoft-using cronies. Although it can share files with Microsoft Word, StarOffice's Writer can have trouble interpreting documents with complex formatting. A file in StarOffice can look very different than in its original Word version.

The Components

Writer and Calc are StarOffice's heart. Both offer most features an average user needs. Writer offers complex formatting tools, footnotes, spell checking, and columnar text. Calc includes autocompletion and a chart-generator wizard.

You can use the Impress presentation app to generate impressive PowerPoint-like presentations. Draw is a vector-based illustration tool for creating 2D and 3D objects that you can move and resize easily.

Adabas D, a relational database, isn't available as part of OpenOffice, and it feels like an afterthought in StarOffice. The personal edition is limited to 100MB of data, requires a separate installation process, and is scarcely mentioned in the print manual. In fact, you can download the app free at www.softwareag.com/adabasd.

StarOffice's apps are nicely integrated, so sharing data is a breeze. For example, you can create a chart in Calc, drag it into Impress, and resize the chart to fit the presentation.

StarOffice doesn't attempt to be a work-alike. If you use another office suite, you'll have to adjust to finding certain StarOffice functions under different menus. The apps are generally intuitive, however, and a revamped help system is useful. The apps aren't particularly Internet-savvy, though. For example, you can't publish docs directly to the Web for online collaboration.

Swing On A Star?

StarOffice supports Linux, Solaris, and Windows (including Win95, which Office XP doesn't). The three installers are on one CD, and StarOffice is licensed on a per-user basis (install it on as many as five computers; you can install Office XP on only two). There isn't a Mac version, but an OpenOffice version is in the works.

Should you buy StarOffice or get the free OpenOffice? For a good print manual, easy CD installation, and access to technical support, go with StarOffice. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

For a comparison chart of StarOffice and OpenOffice features, go to www.smartcomputing.com/cpumag/oct02/staroffice.

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect